A Case Against the Chomskyan Linguistic Cult

(Skinner–Chomsky Debate Series, 2 part)

Peter Ayolov

2026

Abstract

The Chomskyan revolution began as an intellectual rebellion and ended as a paradigm. Noam Chomsky's critique of behaviourism transformed twentieth-century linguistics by rejecting the idea that linguistic competence could be adequately explained through environmental learning and by locating the decisive causes of language within the biological organisation of the human organism. Yet the subsequent history of Universal Grammar presents a Kuhnian paradox: the theory that helped overthrow one scientific orthodoxy gradually became an orthodoxy of its own. Across successive transformations from transformational grammar and Principles and Parameters to Minimalism and Merge, the specifically innate content attributed to the human language faculty became increasingly abstract and economical. Controversies surrounding linguistic universals, recursion, Pirahã, statistical learning and cross-linguistic diversity consequently raise a difficult question: does this history represent the progressive refinement of a successful scientific programme, or the preservation of its central nativist commitment through continual theoretical retreat? The provocative expression "Chomskyan linguistic cult" is used here not to describe generative linguistics literally as a religious cult, but as a metaphor for the institutional, philosophical and paradigmatic protection that can develop around a revolutionary scientific framework once its assumptions become intertwined with disciplinary authority and a culturally powerful conception of human nature. The deeper argument of this article is that the persistence of the Chomskyan paradigm cannot be understood exclusively as a technical controversy about grammar. Linguistic innateness preserves an attractive image of Homo sapiens as possessing a privileged interior capacity that precedes and constrains cultural experience. Although Chomsky's theory is biological rather than spiritual, this conception occupies some of the philosophical territory historically assigned to soul, reason and autonomous mind. Large Language Models now disturb that image by demonstrating that statistical prediction can generate sophisticated linguistic behaviour without a human biological language faculty. Following Elan Barenholtz's conception of LLMs as mirrors, the resulting shock can be reversed: instead of asking why machines lack the depth supposedly hidden behind human language, it becomes necessary to ask why prediction can reproduce so many linguistic signs through which that depth has traditionally been inferred. Ayolov's Miscommunication Trilogy and The Planned Obsolescence of Language extend this reversal into a more radical hypothesis. Language may not be the timeless expression of an innate human essence but a comparatively recent cultural technology imposed upon an evolutionarily older prelinguistic organism, progressively reorganising cognition, identity and social organisation while creating

the illusion that the linguistic self is the original author of its own words. Artificial intelligence marks a decisive threshold because language can now reproduce outside its original biological host. The post-Chomskyan question is therefore no longer simply how language exists inside humanity, but what language has done to humanity since humanity acquired it. In this reversal lies the possibility of a new paradigm: from language as human essence towards language as historically contingent technology, and eventually from linguistic civilisation towards the possibility of its planned obsolescence.

Keywords

Noam Chomsky; B. F. Skinner; Universal Grammar; Chomskyan linguistics; generative grammar; Merge; Minimalism; Thomas Kuhn; scientific paradigms; linguistic nativism; Daniel Everett; Pirahã; falsifiability; Large Language Models; Elan Barenholtz; Peter Ayolov; Miscommunication Trilogy; The Planned Obsolescence of Language; autonomous self; prelinguistic cognition; language as technology; post-linguistic paradigm

Introduction: When the Revolutionary Becomes the Establishment

Noam Chomsky entered twentieth-century linguistics as an intellectual revolutionary. His 1959 attack on B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior challenged not merely one theory of language acquisition but an entire conception of scientific explanation. Behaviourism had attempted to understand verbal activity through organisms, environments and histories of interaction; Chomsky insisted that the extraordinary generativity of language required scientists to look inside the organism towards structures that experience alone could not provide. The revolution succeeded spectacularly. Generative grammar became one of the defining intellectual projects of modern linguistics, Universal Grammar became inseparable from debates about human nature, and Chomsky acquired an authority extending far beyond his discipline. Yet Thomas Kuhn's account of scientific revolutions contains an uncomfortable lesson for every successful revolutionary: once a new paradigm triumphs, it eventually becomes the framework of normal science. Its vocabulary enters textbooks, its assumptions organise research programmes, its questions determine which problems appear important, and younger researchers encounter the revolution not as revolution but as intellectual reality. This is the sense in which the deliberately provocative phrase "Chomskyan linguistic cult" is used here. It does not mean that Chomsky founded a literal cult, that generative linguists are religious believers, or that decades of generative research can be dismissed as dogma. It identifies a more interesting danger: the possibility that a scientific paradigm can become so deeply connected with disciplinary authority and a particular conception of humanity that abandoning its foundational assumptions becomes increasingly difficult. Universal Grammar changed repeatedly, from richer theories of innate linguistic structure towards Minimalism and increasingly economical formulations centred upon operations such as Merge. Each transformation can reasonably be interpreted as theoretical refinement. But the opposite question must remain scientifically legitimate: at what point does refinement become retreat, and how can a hypothesis of linguistic universality be falsified if apparent counterexamples can continually be relocated to deeper, more abstract levels of explanation?

The problem becomes larger because what is being protected may be more than a theory of grammar. Chomsky's linguistic nativism offered a powerful scientific image of the human

being as possessing an intrinsic biological nature that could never be completely manufactured by environmental circumstances. This was never a religious theory, yet it preserved within naturalistic language an ancient intuition: something uniquely human originates from inside. Ayolov's Miscommunication Trilogy and The Planned Obsolescence of Language propose the opposite vector. Instead of beginning with language as an innate expression of humanity, they begin with the evolutionarily older human organism upon which language subsequently acts. Homo sapiens did not begin as a sentence, a grammar or a linguistic self. Beneath verbal consciousness lies a far older architecture of perception, affect, bodily regulation, spatial orientation, memory and social interaction. Language can therefore be reconceived as a comparatively recent cultural technology entering this prelinguistic organism from an already existing verbal community and progressively reorganising how humans classify reality, remember experience, construct identity and coordinate increasingly large societies. Large Language Models make this reversal newly visible. As Elan Barenholtz's mirror metaphor suggests, systems based upon prediction can reproduce many of the linguistic performances once associated with an autonomous linguistic interior. The disturbing possibility is not that machines have secretly acquired the human soul, but that humans may have mistaken properties of language for evidence of such an interior depth. This is where the post-Chomskyan question begins. The problem is no longer merely whether Universal Grammar exists somewhere inside the brain. It is whether identifying language so completely with human nature prevented linguistics from asking the inverse question: what if language is not fundamentally what humans are, but something that happened to humans? If the first article in this series reopened the supposedly finished Skinner–Chomsky debate, the present article asks why its old verdict became so difficult to abandon—and whether escaping the Chomskyan paradigm requires not another theory of grammar, but an entirely different relationship between humanity and language.

Part I: From Scientific Revolution to Linguistic Orthodoxy

Every successful scientific revolution contains a paradox: if it succeeds completely, the rebellion eventually becomes the establishment. Chomsky's transformation of linguistics followed precisely this trajectory. His attack on Skinner helped overturn the behaviourist conviction that explanation should remain focused upon observable relations between organisms and environments, replacing it with a programme centred upon internal linguistic structures and biological constraints. What had initially been revolutionary gradually became the conceptual vocabulary within which generations of linguists were educated. Yet Universal Grammar itself never remained stable. Transformational grammar gave way to increasingly elaborate generative models, Principles and Parameters attempted to reconcile linguistic diversity with a common biological architecture, and the Minimalist Program later sought to reduce the specifically linguistic inheritance towards much simpler computational principles, particularly Merge. Such transformations are perfectly compatible with scientific progress: theories should change when evidence and theoretical economy demand it. The difficulty arises when the central proposition survives while the empirical content attached to it becomes progressively harder to identify. The controversy surrounding Daniel Everett's work on Pirahã illustrates the problem. Claims that Pirahã challenged the universality of recursion generated intense disagreement about the data, the definition of recursion and whether an underlying recursive capacity might remain present even when particular grammatical constructions were

absent. Pirahã did not simply "disprove Chomsky," but the dispute revealed a deeper methodological question: what observation could disprove a linguistic universal if its absence from actual language can be explained by locating the universal at an increasingly abstract level? Here the metaphor of the Chomskyan linguistic cult acquires its intended meaning. The problem is not belief in Chomsky as a person, but the Kuhnian tendency of mature paradigms to absorb anomalies by translating them into their own conceptual language. The revolutionary theory begins determining in advance what counts as legitimate evidence against itself.

This is especially significant because Chomsky's paradigm did more than propose a technical model of grammar; it helped determine where linguistics should search for language. The answer was inward, towards an innate biological capacity whose essential organisation precedes the linguistic environment encountered by the child. Ayolov's alternative reverses this direction. Rather than beginning with a language faculty and asking how experience activates it, the argument begins with the evolutionarily ancient prelinguistic organism and asks what happens when a historically accumulated symbolic technology enters it. From this perspective, language does not need to exist as an autonomous object hidden inside every individual speaker. It exists socially before the individual acquires it: as words, conventions, grammatical regularities, narratives and behavioural practices circulating among other humans. No infant chooses this system, designs its categories or consciously decides to organise experience through it. The verbal culture arrives from outside and gradually becomes so deeply internalised that its inherited categories are experienced as properties of thought itself. This is precisely why the gradual contraction of Universal Grammar matters philosophically. If increasingly sophisticated linguistic organisation can be explained through general learning capacities, cultural transmission, statistical regularities and interaction with structured environments, then less language needs to be placed inside the human organism before experience begins. The question consequently changes from "Which grammar is already there?" to "How much grammar needs to be there at all?" LLMs intensify this challenge without resolving the biological question: systems possessing no human genetic inheritance can nevertheless extract astonishing linguistic regularities from accumulated verbal culture. The importance of the Chomskyan revolution should therefore not be denied; it should be historicised. Chomsky liberated linguistics from one orthodoxy, but the paradigm created by that liberation may now constrain the next conceptual transformation. Scientific revolutions require more than replacing answers. Eventually they require abandoning questions that the previous paradigm made seem unavoidable. The post-Chomskyan revolution begins when language is no longer automatically sought as an innate possession inside Homo sapiens, but investigated as a cultural technology that entered human evolutionary history, transformed the organism that acquired it, and eventually became powerful enough to disguise its own historical arrival.

Part II: The Last Ghost in the Grammar: Why Innateness Is So Difficult to Abandon

The persistence of the Chomskyan paradigm cannot be explained only by the technical strengths or weaknesses of Universal Grammar. Behind the linguistic argument stands a far older image of the human being: the conviction that something essential must originate from within. Chomsky's theory is biological and materialist rather than religious, and Universal Grammar should never be confused literally with a soul. Yet linguistic nativism occupies a philosophical territory once reserved for concepts such as spirit, reason and autonomous mind. The

environment provides words and particular languages, but the deepest capacity supposedly belongs to the organism before culture reaches it. This helps explain why the Skinner–Chomsky confrontation became so emotionally and politically charged. Skinner's attempt to remove autonomous man from behavioural explanation appeared to dissolve the individual into environmental contingencies; Chomsky's emphasis on innate human nature restored an internal limit to what environments could create. Language consequently became more than language. It became evidence that the human being contains something irreducible to external history. This is where the metaphor of a Chomskyan linguistic cult acquires its deeper meaning: what becomes difficult to surrender is not merely a grammatical hypothesis but an attractive conception of humanity. When Universal Grammar contracts from increasingly rich innate structures towards more minimal principles, the final innate remainder can begin to resemble the last ghost in the grammar—the proposition that something specifically linguistic must still be there before linguistic experience begins. Ayolov's thesis challenges this assumption from the opposite direction. The starting point should not be an innate linguistic subject waiting to develop, but an evolutionarily ancient organism whose ancestors perceived, desired, feared, remembered, cooperated and acted long before contemporary linguistic systems existed. Language arrives later. The prelinguistic organism is therefore not an incomplete linguistic human waiting for words; it is the biological foundation upon which the linguistic self will subsequently be constructed.

LLMs make this reversal difficult to dismiss because they separate linguistic performance from the kind of inner being historically inferred from it. A machine can say "I think," construct an argument, generate a metaphor or produce an apparently intimate confession without thereby demonstrating the autonomous psychic centre humans normally imagine behind such expressions. Barenholtz's mirror is disturbing for precisely this reason: it reflects not a secret soul inside the machine but humanity's tendency to infer depth from linguistic behaviour. Whenever the machine crosses another linguistic boundary, the defence of human uniqueness moves further inward: it can write, but it does not understand; it can reason linguistically, but it does not experience; it can appear creative, but it is not conscious. These distinctions may be entirely legitimate, yet their movement reveals that language itself can no longer carry the philosophical burden once assigned to it. Ayolov's Miscommunication Trilogy pushes the implication further by treating language not merely as a transparent medium through which an already existing self communicates, but as a system that participates in manufacturing that self while simultaneously generating misunderstanding, abstraction and competing symbolic realities. The Planned Obsolescence of Language radicalises the argument again: if language is a historically acquired technology rather than the biological essence of Homo sapiens, there is no reason to assume that humanity must remain permanently organised around it. The truly post-Chomskyan proposition is therefore not simply that Universal Grammar may be wrong. It is that linguistics may have reversed cause and consequence. Instead of an autonomous linguistic self generating language from within, language acquired from outside may help generate the experience of an autonomous linguistic self. The ghost in the grammar would then be neither soul nor innate syntax, but the speaker imagined as the sovereign origin of words that were overwhelmingly inherited from others. Once this possibility is admitted, the question "What is innate in language?" gives way to a more disruptive question: what remains of the human being when language is no longer permitted to define it?

Part III: Killing the Linguistic Father: Science After Chomsky

The deepest difficulty facing a post-Chomskyan linguistics may not be disproving a particular version of Universal Grammar but learning to think about language without Chomsky. This is the final paradox of his extraordinary intellectual career. Chomsky entered linguistics as an insurgent who challenged the dominant explanatory order, yet the scale of his success eventually made him one of the most powerful intellectual reference points in the modern study of language. This does not make Chomsky a literal dictator, nor does scientific influence constitute political tyranny. But it permits the more interesting concept of paradigmatic authority: the capacity of a foundational thinker to establish the vocabulary through which subsequent generations formulate problems, recognise evidence and define legitimate disagreement. In this sense, Chomsky can survive Chomsky. A scientific paradigm does not disappear when its founder disappears because it has already migrated into institutions, textbooks, departments, professional identities and habits of thought. The revolutionary becomes what might be called a cognitive sovereign: not someone issuing commands, but a figure whose conceptual architecture establishes the borders within which thought proceeds. The provocative task of "killing the linguistic father" therefore means neither erasing Chomsky nor denying his immense contribution. It means completing the scientific revolution by making Chomsky himself historical. Newton remained indispensable after Newtonian physics ceased to define the absolute horizon of physics; similarly, Chomsky may remain one of the decisive figures in the history of linguistics even if the next paradigm abandons the assumption that language must be explained primarily through an innate, specifically linguistic architecture. The genuine break occurs when researchers cease asking how much of Chomsky can be preserved and begin asking which questions become possible once the Chomskyan framework is no longer the obligatory starting point.

Such a transformation would not simply restore Skinner and return linguistics to 1957. The emerging alternative is potentially stranger: Skinner's verbal culture, statistical learning, usage-based approaches, cultural evolution, predictive models, LLMs and Barenholtz's mirror can be brought into a new constellation without being reduced to a single theory. Ayolov's hypothesis pushes this constellation beyond linguistics itself by reversing the traditional direction of explanation. Instead of asking how an innate language faculty allowed Homo sapiens to become linguistic, it asks what happened to Homo sapiens after language became a dominant technology of human organisation. Language made possible unprecedented coordination among strangers, accumulation of knowledge, laws, religions, bureaucracies, nations and ideological systems; but the same technology multiplied abstraction, misunderstanding and symbolic forms of control. The linguistic self learned to experience inherited words and categories as its own internal voice, while increasingly large societies became governable through narratives, rules, promises, prohibitions and identities that existed primarily within shared symbolic systems. The transition from language as biological essence to language as social technology therefore carries an unavoidable political consequence. Once words are understood not merely as expressions of autonomous individuals but as instruments capable of organising millions of individuals simultaneously, the problem of language becomes inseparable from the problem of power. Who produces the dominant descriptions of reality? Who controls the verbal environment? How does symbolic coordination change when societies scale from small communities to cities, states and digital populations? The death of the Chomskyan linguistic father consequently opens a much darker question than whether Merge is innate. If language helped make mass civilisation possible, then hierarchy, institutional

control and political authority may have to be reconsidered as technologies of scale rather than simply moral failures of individual rulers. At that point the argument leaves linguistics and enters the territory of the third article: the evolution of tyranny and the scale laws of dictatorship.

Conclusion: After Chomsky: The Death of the Linguistic God

To argue for the end of the Chomskyan paradigm is not to diminish Chomsky's historical importance. On the contrary, only an intellectual achievement of exceptional magnitude can become the paradigm against which another revolution must eventually define itself. Chomsky transformed linguistics because he changed the direction of explanation: language was no longer adequately understood as behaviour shaped within an environment but as evidence of internal biological organisation. Yet scientific revolutions cannot exempt their own foundations from historical change. Universal Grammar evolved, its proposed innate content became increasingly minimal, statistical learning demonstrated unsuspected powers of environmental pattern extraction, linguistic diversity complicated claims of universality, and LLMs finally demonstrated on an unprecedented scale that prediction-based systems can generate sophisticated linguistic structures without possessing a human biological language faculty. None of these developments individually disproves linguistic innateness. Together, however, they weaken the intellectual monopoly that made the Chomskyan paradigm appear synonymous with scientific seriousness about language. The metaphorical "death of the linguistic god" therefore describes neither the death of Chomsky nor the disappearance of generative linguistics. It describes the end of the assumption that language must be explained primarily by searching for its deepest source inside an autonomous linguistic human. The decisive reversal is methodological: instead of asking what hidden structures inside Homo sapiens make language possible, the emerging paradigm can ask what language, once culturally acquired, does to Homo sapiens. The object of investigation changes from the origin of grammar inside the individual towards the historical consequences of a symbolic technology acting upon biological organisms, cultures and societies.

This reversal is the point at which Ayolov's Miscommunication Trilogy and The Planned Obsolescence of Language move beyond both Skinner and Chomsky. Skinner provides the crucial destruction of autonomous man; Chomsky demonstrates the extraordinary explanatory power of internal structure; Barenholtz's LLM mirror reveals how prediction can reproduce linguistic performances that humans instinctively associate with inner depth. But the next proposition is different: language itself may be a temporary evolutionary-cultural regime rather than the permanent essence of humanity. The human organism is older than words. Its body, affects, perceptions, drives and non-verbal relations belong to an evolutionary history extending far beyond linguistic civilisation. Language entered this ancient organism, expanded its powers dramatically, but also created new possibilities for abstraction, miscommunication, ideology and mass symbolic coordination. With LLMs, the process reaches a historical threshold because language begins to generate language outside its original biological host. The supposed linguistic essence of humanity reveals itself as transferable. The ultimate question is therefore no longer whether machines can become sufficiently human by acquiring language, but whether humans can rediscover what they are without defining themselves through language. Yet this possibility immediately produces a political problem. The same symbolic technology that constructs the linguistic self also permits millions of strangers to be organised through laws,

myths, institutions, identities and commands. As populations and networks grow, so does the problem of coordinating behaviour and controlling unpredictable complexity. The end of Chomskyan linguistic sovereignty thus opens directly onto the question of political sovereignty. If the autonomous individual is partly a linguistic construction, and if mass civilisation itself depends upon symbolic technologies of coordination, perhaps tyranny and dictatorship must also be reconsidered—not simply as pathological personalities or historical accidents, but as recurring solutions, however dangerous, to problems created by human scale. The next article therefore leaves the grammar laboratory and enters the political system. After the linguistic revolution comes the problem it can no longer avoid: Evolution of Tyranny: The Scale Laws of Dictatorship.

References

Ayolov, P. (2026) The Miscommunication Trilogy. Unpublished manuscript.

Ayolov, P. (2026) The Planned Obsolescence of Language. Unpublished manuscript.

Barenholtz, E. (2025) ‘Large language models as mirrors of human language and cognition’. Center for the Future Mind, Florida Atlantic University.

Chomsky, N. (1959) ‘A review of B. F. Skinner’s Verbal Behavior’, Language, 35(1), pp. 26–58.

Chomsky, N. (1965) Aspects of the Theory of Syntax. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. (1971) ‘The case against B. F. Skinner’, The New York Review of Books, 30 December.

Chomsky, N. (1980) Rules and Representations. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chomsky, N. (1981) Lectures on Government and Binding. Dordrecht: Foris.

Chomsky, N. (1995) The Minimalist Program. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. (2005) ‘Three factors in language design’, Linguistic Inquiry, 36(1), pp. 1–22.

Chomsky, N., Roberts, I. and Watumull, J. (2023) ‘The false promise of ChatGPT’, The New York Times, 8 March.

Everett, D.L. (2005) ‘Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã: Another look at the design features of human language’, Current Anthropology, 46(4), pp. 621–646.

Everett, D.L. (2008) Don’t Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle. New York: Pantheon Books.

Fitch, W.T., Hauser, M.D. and Chomsky, N. (2005) ‘The evolution of the language faculty: Clarifications and implications’, Cognition, 97(2), pp. 179–210.

Hauser, M.D., Chomsky, N. and Fitch, W.T. (2002) ‘The faculty of language: What is it, who has it, and how did it evolve?’, Science, 298(5598), pp. 1569–1579.

Kuhn, T.S. (1962) The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

MacCorquodale, K. (1970) 'On Chomsky's review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior', Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, 13(1), pp. 83–99.

Marcus, G.F., Vijayan, S., Bandi Rao, S. and Vishton, P.M. (1999) 'Rule learning by seven-month-old infants', Science, 283(5398), pp. 77–80.

Nevins, A., Pesetsky, D. and Rodrigues, C. (2009) 'Pirahã exceptionality: A reassessment', Language, 85(2), pp. 355–404.

Pinker, S. (1994) The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language. New York: William Morrow.

Saffran, J.R., Aslin, R.N. and Newport, E.L. (1996) 'Statistical learning by 8-month-old infants', Science, 274(5294), pp. 1926–1928.

Skinner, B.F. (1953) Science and Human Behavior. New York: Macmillan.

Skinner, B.F. (1957) Verbal Behavior. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Skinner, B.F. (1971) Beyond Freedom and Dignity. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Skinner, B.F. (1974) About Behaviorism. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Skinner, B.F. (1981) 'Selection by consequences', Science, 213(4507), pp. 501–504.

Skinner, B.F. and Segal, E.F. (1988) Discussion of verbal behavior. Interview conducted at Harvard University, February 1988.

Tomasello, M. (2003) Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vaswani, A., Shazeer, N., Parmar, N., Uszkoreit, J., Jones, L., Gomez, A.N., Kaiser, Ł. and Polosukhin, I. (2017) 'Attention is all you need', Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems, 30, pp. 5998–6008.